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ABSTRACT

A Mexican study investigated the relationship between foreign language learning motivation, anxiety, and learning strategies of beginning-level university English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students who are at risk of failing the EFL class only. Subjects were 68 students identified as having serious problems with listening comprehension and having previous academic problems in their English courses, and who subsequently attended 16 learning strategy training sessions. At the beginning and end of the course, they completed listening comprehension tests and questionnaires concerning their motivation to learn English, amount of communication anxiety they experienced in the classroom, and listening strategies they used. Pre- and post-treatment data were compared to those of a control group of proficient students. Results indicate that the motivation scores were similar before and after treatment and in the proficient group, although the treatment group did improve in attitude. Even though the at-risk learners' scores were consistently lower than those of the proficient students, the at-risk group made significant improvement in their scores between the pre- and post-listening comprehension test while the proficient EFL learners who had not attended the strategy sessions showed no significant differences. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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A Mexican Project with University Academic At-risk English as a Foreign Language Students

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Connie Johnson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

A Mexican Project with University Academic At-risk English as a Foreign Language Students

This project examined the relationship between foreign language motivation, anxiety, and learning strategies of beginning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) proficient and at-risk Mexican university students. It represents an overview of a two year project which is sponsored by the Mexican Foundation for Science and Technology (CONACYT) to study reasons for failure of Mexican university EFL academic-at-risk learners and to explore possible intervention techniques.

For decades English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been a requirement for all Mexican secondary, high school and university students, however, since Mexico's entrance into the North American Free Trade Agreement, it has intensified in importance. Foreign companies which are scrambling to establish branches in Mexico are requiring 80-100% proficiency in English as a basic requirement for its management and technical personnel. Never before have Mexican educational institutions so emphasized the importance of English, nor have university students felt such an urgency to learn the language. English has become the key to obtain jobs and the graduates that have the highest proficiency secure the best positions and salaries. Failure to learn English not only signifies having a poorly paid job, but also, not graduating from the university.

Even though Mexico has required English classes in secondary schools for many years, the proficiency level of students finishing high school is generally low. Only a few of the private Mexican schools can accurately claim to produce fluent Spanish/English bilingual graduates. The majority of private and public school high school graduates have what could be considered as only a basic EFL level. In 1993 the Mexican government changed the national EFL curriculum from a principally grammar-translation focus to a communicative approach, however, many of the teachers continued using the traditional method due to their own lack of oral proficiency. Since 1993, the number of EFL teacher training programs in public universities have been escalated in an attempt to meet the

demand for adequately trained English teachers, but the demand still exceeds the supply.

When Mexican students arrive to a university where a predetermined number of semesters of EFL study is again required, they take placement exams to assign them to their appropriate levels. The majority place into basic level classes where they are immersed in English. Using the communicative approach, the instructor only speaks in the target language, expects them to employ English in classroom learning tasks and is continually evaluating their listening and speaking skills. The classes do not focus on grammar as did their previous English courses; instead, the students are expected to actively use the foreign language.

THE AT-RISK PROJECT

The study on which this article is based began several years ago with a simple question which most English as a Second/Foreign Language teachers have asked themselves, "Why is it that some students can learn a language apparently with ease while others given the same opportunities find it almost impossible?". The answer many teachers would give is that the "good" learner has a "knack for languages" or an "ear for languages" while the "poor" learner is an "underachiever" or "lazy". During the past two years, the author has been directing a research project which is sponsored by her University, the Universidad de las Americas-Puebla, and by the Mexican Government's Foundation for Science and Technology (CONACYT) entitled "The Role of Strategies and Motivation in the Learning of English as a Foreign Language with Academic At-risk Students".

The author's definition of at-risk students that this paper and the CONACYT project uses is "those EFL learners who are having academic problems in their basic English classes and are considered by their teachers to be at-risk of failing the English course but who are not experiencing academic problems in their other university courses". These students were initially identified by their EFL

teachers based on a history of previous English failures and through a listening comprehension screening test. This test was applied to all the basic level students as a pre-test at the beginning of the semester and as a post-test at the end. After referral by their instructors, the at-risk learners were given a chance to participate in strategy awareness sessions to improve their listening skills.

The skill of oral comprehension was decided as the focus to identify the at-risk learner and for the project's intervention sessions for several reasons: 1) the majority of the at-risk students in the basic level came from schools where English was never spoken by the teacher, 2) their daily EFL classes had a strong listening component and each of their exams contained sections to evaluate the students' oral comprehension, 3) the skills of reading and writing were areas in which the at-risk learners had fewer problems, and 4) there were only 16, one hour intervention sessions during the semester which would be insufficient time to focus on all skill areas.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In reviewing published studies dealing with research into the affective variables in second and foreign language acquisition, several factors are generally identified as possible causes for EFL at-riskness: 1) a poor attitude toward the L2 culture and motivation to learn the foreign language, 2) high classroom anxiety, and 3) lack or inefficient use of language learning strategies. Instruments were used to analyze these three factors in the at-risk learners at the beginning and at the end of the intervention sessions which provided listening comprehension strategy training in a low-anxiety and highly motivating setting.

Motivation

Motivation has been frequently mentioned as one of the main determinants of second/foreign language acquisition. During the last three decades investigators have amassed considerable information about the nature and role of motivation in the language learning process.

The predominate theory behind second language attitude and motivation maintains that the language learner must "be psychologically prepared to adopt various aspects of behavior which characterize members of another linguistic-cultural group" if the Foreign Language (FL) is to be attained successfully (Gardner & Lambert, 1972: 3). Two different types of motivation have been identified. If the learners' attitudes toward the language, culture and people are positive and they want to succeed in learning the language due to an internal desire, then the motivation is considered to be *integrative* in nature. However, if the learners' motivation is principally to obtain a good job, study in the FL country or for other external reasons, then it is considered as *instrumental* motivation. The possibility of one type of motivation being more beneficial than another has been repeatedly debated.

Oxford & Shearin (1994) speculate upon the differences between second and foreign language learning motivation. Because the second language learning situation is one in which the learner is surrounded by the target language in the country where it is spoken, there is more visual and auditory stimulation. Therefore, the integrative motivation to acquire the L2 is greater than for students who are instrumentally motivated studying the FL in their own country. They feel that integrative motivation is the deciding factor in better FL acquisition. They also discussed the fact that the motivation to learn the language is proportional to the chance of success in the learning process, and that the outcome must be at least equivalent to the amount of effort put into it or the learner will withdraw from the FL situation.

Dornyei (1990) suggests that integrative motivation is much less significant to a foreign language learner than to a second language student in the target language environment. The FL students rarely have enough exposure to the culture and community of the target language to have established strong attitudes about the language and people, thus, making instrumental goals much more

powerful. Dornyei also states that the motivation to learn the FL for instrumental purposes (jobs, promotion, future study) is more real for the learner than are the integrative motivators (internal desire). He does not deny, however, that for FL students to advance beyond the intermediate level, a certain amount of integrative motivation would probably be necessary.

Anxiety

Two basic types of anxiety have been identified by psychologists: facilitating and debilitating. If the task is demanding but relatively simple to succeed then anxiety can be facilitating and improve performance through increased effort. However, if the level of difficulty of the task increases beyond the likelihood of success, failure can begin to occur and the compensation or reward of succeeding is not equal to the amount of effort put in, then debilitating anxiety initiates. As demand further exceeds ability, the psychological damage caused by anxiety worsens. Learners who experience facilitating anxiety will be able to process the L2 information more effectively and quickly than those with debilitation anxiety who are distracted by task-irrelevant cognition (Macintyre, 1995).

The relations between anxiety, cognition and behavior are cyclical. If the anxiety is facilitating, then the cognition and resulting behavior are positive to learning. If the anxiety becomes debilitating, then the cognitive performance diminishes, repeated failures begin to occur causing negative self-evaluation which in turn leads to lessened motivation, poor performance and greater anxiety (Macintyre, 1995).

After repeated negative experiences, students can fall into this cycle of learned-helplessness. These students may exhibit a wide range of symptoms. For example, they may respond correctly in a group drill but freeze when asked to use the FL in a free speech situation. They seem to understand during the class but, when confronted with the same point on a test, they forget. They have

difficulty concentrating, become forgetful and actually sweat or have heart palpitations when called on to respond in the FL class. Sometimes they experience a need for physical activity which causes them to tap the pencil, have headaches and begin to display avoidance behaviors such as not doing homework and missing class (Horwitz et. al., 1986).

The majority of high anxiety in an FL situation centers on two basic tasks: listening and speaking. Speaking is the skill which has been cited as causing the highest anxiety. The student literally freezes and cannot reply, however, listening anxiety is in a close second place. These problems are often explained by the learner as a difficulty in discriminating sounds and words in the target language. The words are reported to fuse together and become a blur of indistinguishable noise (Horwitz, et. al., 1986).

The cyclical effect has also been discussed in literature concerning communication apprehension, reinforcement and learned helplessness. Learners who feel anxious in their attempt to communicate in the FL have a tendency to avoid such situations. As a result, they will not be exposed to chances to practice their communication skills (listening and speaking) and, thus, will perform worse in these areas than their peers who take advantage of communication opportunities. The negative result confirms their expectations that they "cannot" learn the FL which contributes to greater anxiety leading to an increased avoidance of the communicative situation and to a proliferation of their learned helplessness (Horwitz & Young, 1991).

Language Learning Strategies

During the past decade, much attention has been given in literature to the identification and classification of language learning strategies. Researchers in the area of applied linguistics have collected, classified and disseminated huge amounts of valuable information concerning FL learning styles and strategies. Learning strategies are generally accepted as being the conscious or

unconscious steps that are taken by language students to aid in their acquisition process.

Rebecca Oxford, possibly the most published expert in the area of learning strategies identifies (1990) two different divisions of language learning strategies: *direct* and *indirect*. The direct strategies are sub-classfied as memory, cognitive and compensation strategies which directly involve the target language during its mental processing. The indirect strategies are sub-divided as metacognitive, social and affective strategies that allow the learner to control and coordinate the learning process. Effective learners use a variety of learning strategies which would be appropriate to the learning task, however, research indicates that the number of strategies are probably less important than the correct use of them. Unsuccessful FL learners may use a large number of strategies but in a random and ineffective fashion (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995).

Vogely (1995) found in her study of perceived strategy use with authentic listening comprehension tasks that subjects varied in their choice and manner in which they were using the strategies rather than the number of strategies they had to choose from. They tended to use the bottom-up strategies (knowledge of syntax, grammar and vocabulary) with the more difficult passages and top-down strategies (knowledge of the situation) with easier tasks. Her findings implied that students may have a wide range of strategies to choose from but often select the least effective ones for the particular assignment.

During the past decade, the validity of teaching language learning strategies has been a subject of considerable controversy. This debate centers around the assumption that strategic competence develops in the FL learners native language during their years of education and is transferred automatically to the foreign language. According to Bialystok and Kellerman (1987), adult language learners arrive to the FL situation with a well developed repertoire of strategies regardless of their level of proficiency in the target

language. "If, therefore, there is no new linguistic knowledge involved and the cognitive processes are familiar from the L1, what then is the point in teaching these strategies? (p. 60)."

Dörnyei (1995) disagrees and maintains that not only is strategy training desirable, it is also possible. He was able to qualitatively and quantitatively prove in his study that EFL communication strategies use increased due to direct strategy training. By "direct", he meant that the student should be made aware of objectives of the strategy training sessions as well as of how to use the strategies themselves. Also, the same study found that the effectiveness of the training was unrelated to the learners level of EFL competence which indicates that training can be effectively employed in pre-intermediate levels.

PARTICIPANTS

During the two semesters of the study, one hundred and thirty-seven beginning level EFL academic-at-risk learners were identified by their instructors as having serious problems with the skill of listening comprehension and having experienced previous academic problems in their English courses. The purpose of the project was explained to the students and they were provided with four options to choose the time they would prefer to attend the training sessions which were not obligatory. The students who chose the two time options which contained the most participants became the experimental groups for the study and were invited to attend the intervention sessions which were offered for one hour twice a week for eight consecutive weeks.

A total of 68 students entered the sessions during the two semesters, 38 were male and 30 were female. On the first day they completed a series of questionnaires to evaluate their motivation to learn the target language, the amount of communicative anxiety they experienced in the language classroom and the listening strategies they were presently employing. These same instruments were again completed after the 16 sessions were completed. An equal number of

proficient basic EFL students completed the same instruments but only once.

INSTRUMENTS and RESULTS

The following is a discussion of the three instruments used in the study. All the instruments employed a five point Likert scale for the students to rate their answers. Following each discussion, the results of a t-tests which were applied to the scores of the different groups that used the instruments are provided and briefly discussed. The preset level of significance that was employed for all the t-test results was that of $P<.05^{*}$.

The at-risk results are divided into "Before" and "After" which signifies "before the intervention sessions" and "after the sessions". Both the at-risk group scores were compared to a third group, that is the "Proficient" learners.

Motivation

Two Canadian social psychologists, Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1972) developed an instrument known as the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) which has been since its publication one of the most recognized and cited mechanisms to evaluate second language learning motivation.

The AMTB consists of three sections: *attitude*, *integrative motivation*, and *instrumental motivation* . The *attitude* section was designed to evaluate the language learners attitude toward the FL culture and people and their willingness to adopt various aspects of behavior which characterize members of another linguistic-cultural group. The *integrative* section assessed the degree of internal desire or integrative motivation to learn the FL and, the *instrumental* component tested the the amount of external motivation, such as wanting to study the FL to get a good job or a promotion, the learner had.

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* Probability is less than 5%

In order to ascertain the attitudes and motivation in the at-risk students who participated in the research, an adapted version of the AMBT was developed. The original AMBT instrument was not used because it was lengthy and tested for many areas which did not enter into the at-risk study such as the degree of anomie or of ethnocentrism. However, like the original AMTB, the instrument used in the at-risk study consisted of three sections to test attitudes, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation except that the number of questions was limited to ten in each section. The choices of answers ranged from "Totally in Agreement" to "Totally in Disagreement". The questions which were translated into Spanish were chosen from the AMTB based on their applicability to the students and their learning situations.

The results of the Instrumental Motivation Section showed no significant differences between the three groups although the Before At-risk to Proficient findings were very close to being significant with the Proficient group consistantly having a higher level of instrumental motivation. In general, the scores of the three groups were very similar.

Before to After At-risk
$P \geq 0.17$
Before At-risk to Proficient Students
$P \geq 0.07$
After At-risk to Proficient Students
$P \geq 0.26$

The researcher feels that the explanation for the lack of differences is due to the high level of motivation that all Mexican university students have to learn the English in order to be more competitive in the job market. However, this knowledge of the importance of English may have been a factor which cause the at-risk population to report greater anxiety levels when answering the anxiety instrument.

The results of the t-test of the Integrative Motivation Section shown below proved significant findings only between the Before At-risk and the Proficient groups. As in the Instrumental results, the Proficient learners constantly scored the integrative motivation items higher than did their at-risk counterparts.

Before to After At-risk
$P \geq$ 0.25
Before At-risk to Proficient Students
$P \leq$ 0.03
After At-risk to Proficient Students
$P \geq$ 0.11

The Integrative Motivation results between the Before and After groups show that their internal motivation to learn the language was similar. However, there was improvement although not significant in the After group scores due to the sessions. The significant difference between the Before group and the Proficient group scores supports the conclusion that Gardner and Lambert reached that the more integratively motivated students obtain a higher achievement in learning the second/foreign language.

The greatest differences in the Motivation instrument were found in the results of the attitudes of the groups.

Before to After At-risk
$P \geq$ 0.06
Before At-risk to Proficient Students
$P \leq$ 0.0000074
After At-risk to Proficient Students
$P \leq$ 0.00026

The outcome of the t-test between the at-risk students Before and After the sessions show the After group closely approaching the attitude scores of the Proficient group, however, they lacked one decimal to be considered a significant difference. The surprisingly large gap which existed between the Before the strategy session

group and the Proficient learners demonstrates that the important factor of positive student attitude toward the target people and culture in the language classroom. The Proficient groups' degree of positive attitudes indicates their importance in foreign and second language learning. Even though the sessions seemed to have improved the at-risk learners attitude, there is still a significant difference between the After group and the Proficient learners in their degree of positive attitude toward the English language and culture.

Anxiety

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et. al., 1986) was chosen for the study to distinguish the extent of debilitating anxiety in the EFL at-risk students. This instrument has been widely published and has demonstrated internal reliability in numerous studies to evaluate levels of debilitating anxiety in foreign language learners. The original FLCAS consisted of thirty-three statements to test three main types of foreign language anxiety: 1) anxiety to communicate; 2) test anxiety; and 3) anxiety of being negatively evaluated by peers and teachers in the language classroom. This instrument was used in its entirety with the only modification being its translation into Spanish. As did the AMBT, the FLCAS also used a five point Likert scale ranging from "Totally in Agreement" to "Totally in Disagreement" to evaluate the at-risk learners level of anxiety.

The students in the study were originally categorized at "high, average or low anxiety" based upon their scores on the FLCAS. Those who scored one or more standard deviations above the mean of the participants were identified as "Low Anxiety", those between +.99 and -.99 standard deviations from the mean of the sample were identified as Average Anxiety", and those with one or more standard deviations below the sample mean were considered as "High Anxiety". The Proficient students practically all fell in the "low anxiety" range with only a few placing in the "average anxiety" while the opposite was true of the at-risk learners. The great majority

were considered to be "high anxiety" with some placing in the "high moderate" range. The t-test results shown below indicate the significance of the role of debilitating anxiety as a factor in the study of at-riskness.

Before to After At-risk
P≤ 0.01
Before At-risk to Proficient Students
P≤ 0.000000033
After At-risk to Proficient Students
P≤ 0.00024

The outstanding difference between the Before At-risk group and the Proficient learners denotes an obvious disparity in anxiety levels. Although a large dissimilarity still existed between the After group and the Proficient students, the sessions which were given in a low anxiety situation where the students were continually reinforced positively for their advances is the only factor to account for differences in their anxiety levels. This is also shown in the significant difference between the results of the Before and After the sessions students.

Listening Comprehension Strategies

The instrument which assessed the listening comprehension strategies was adapted from items in Rebecca Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL). This instrument also uses the five point Likert scale, however, its options range from "Always or almost always used" to "Never or almost never used. This 50 item SILL was originally designed to evaluate the Direct and Indirect Strategies used by non-English speakers in their EFL/ESL acquisition. For the purposes of the at-risk study, the instrument was shortened to 27 items to evaluate only the skill of listening comprehension and was translated into Spanish. There were 14 items ascertaining Direct Strategies and 13 the Indirect. Of the Direct, 5 were assessing *memory* strategies, 5 *cognitive* and 4 *compensation* strategies. Of the Indirect, 10 were designed to assess *metacognitive* strategies, 1 *affective* and 2 *social* strategies.

There were very few affective and social strategies included because the at-risk students were studying the target language in their own country and had little need to use the techniques mentioned in the original SILL such as "talking to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English" or "ask English speakers to correct me when I talk".

The results shown below reveal the progress made by the At-risk group to closing the gap between themselves and the Proficient students in strategy use.

Before-After At-risk
$P \leq$ 0.004
Before A.R.-Proficient Students
$P \leq$ 0.0009
After A.R.-Proficient Students
$P \geq$ 0.22

Before the sessions the At-risk sample displayed an enourmous difference in listening strategy use between At-risks and the Proficients, but when evaluated following the sessions there was no significant difference between the two groups. The improvement can also be seen in the t-test scores of the same students before and after the strategy awareness sessions as well as in their EFL class grades which were also improved.

Pre and Post Test Results

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the at-risk students were identified partially through the results of a pre-test which was a listening comprehension instrument to measure the increase of this skill in basic students during the course. It was applied to all the students in this level at the beginning and end of the semester. The pre and post test scores of the at-risk students who participated in the strategy awareness sessions were matched

with the scores of an equal number of proficient learners with the following results.

At-risk Students Pre & Post Test Results
$P \leq$ 0.005
Proficient Students Pre & Post Test Results
$P \geq$ 0.09

Even though the at-risk learners' scores were consistently lower than those of the proficient students, the at-risk group made significant improvement in their scores between the pre and post listening comprehension test while the proficient EFL learners who had not attended the strategy sessions showed no significant differences. Since both groups attended classes in the same level using the same texts and program, the only intervening factor that can be deduced as the reason for the significant change in the at-risk group was their participation in the strategy awareness sessions.

CONCLUSION

A major implication of this study is that foreign language educators should consider alternative solutions for the at-risk learner other than saying the student is "lazy" or has "no ear for language". The relationship between cognitive, metacognitive and affective factors in the language classroom has only been begun to be researched in this and other studies. This article did not attempt to discuss how to teach effective language learning strategies nor how to motivate nor provide a low-anxiety learning experience. However, the results of these three factors in working with at-risk language learning students has been shown. If we are to improve foreign language teaching at all levels of education, teachers must recognize the importance of these aspects in shaping the learners' experiences.

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